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F-2010-01317

Michelle Goldberg

[redacted]

(b)(6)

June 3, 2010

Information and Privacy Coordinator
Central Intelligence Agency
Washington, DC 20505

FOIA REQUEST

Dear FOIA Officer:

Pursuant to the federal Freedom of Information Act, 5 U.S.C. § 552, I request access to and copies of all records that mention the late Indra Devi, aka Eugenia Peterson (She also went by the names Engenia Vassilievna and Eugenia Strakaty). I'm particularly seeking documents related to her relationship with Madame Chiang Kai-Shek during World War II; her communications with the Soviet government and with India's ambassador to the USSR, K. P. S. Menon, in 1960; and all documents pertaining to her communications with the Panamanian Colonel Roberto Diaz Herrera in 1986.

The files will be used as research for a book I'm writing about Indra Devi that will be published by Knopf in 2013.

Originally a Russian citizen, Indra Devi was born as Eugenia Peterson in Riga, Latvia in 1899. She was a yoga teacher, but was also involved with politicians and political intrigue all over the world.

Devi arrived in San Francisco on a boat from Shanghai in 1947, where she had been teaching yoga in Madame Chiang Kai-Shek's home during World War II. (Before that, she had lived in India, where she married Jan Strakaty, the Czech commercial attaché in Bombay, in 1930. They separated in 1946 and he died in 1948.)

On March 14, 1953 she married an American doctor from Germany, Sigfrid Knauer. Shortly thereafter, she became a citizen, and had her name legally changed from Eugenia Strakaty to Indra Devi. Knauer and Devi lived in Los Angeles throughout the 1950s and 1960s, though they also maintained a residence in Tecate, Mexico, starting in 1962. In 1960, Devi traveled to Moscow and met with the Soviet Politburo at the request of K.P.S. Menon, India's ambassador to Russia, to convince them to allow yoga practice in the USSR. In 1986, she briefly moved to Panama to become the spiritual counselor to the Panamanian Colonel Roberto Diaz Herrera, who was attempting to overthrow Manuel Noriega.

Devi died in 2002. I'm attaching a copy of her New York Times obituary. It can also be found online at this address:
http://www.nytimes.com/2002/04/30/world/indra-devi-102-dies-taught-yoga-to-stars-and-leaders.html.

I agree to pay reasonable duplication fees for the processing of this request in an amount not to exceed $1000. However, please notify me prior to your incurring any expenses in excess of that amount.

If my request is denied in whole or part, I ask that you justify all deletions by reference to specific exemptions of the act. I will also expect you to release all segregable portions of otherwise exempt material. I, of course, reserve the right to appeal your decision to withhold any information or to deny a waiver of fees.

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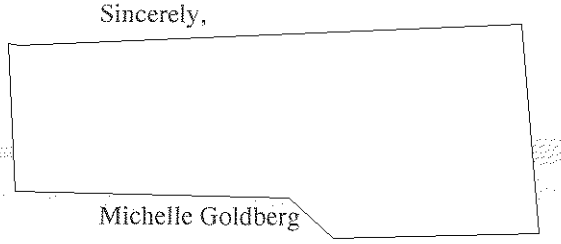
As I am making this request as an author and this information is of timely value, I would appreciate your communicating with me by telephone, rather than by mail, if you have questions regarding this request.

I look forward to your reply within 20 business days, as the statute requires.

Thank you for your assistance.

Sincerely,



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The New York Times
nytimes.com

April 30, 2002

Indra Devi, 102, Dies; Taught Yoga to Stars and Leaders

By DOUGLAS MARTIN

Indra Devi, the daughter of European nobility who introduced the ancient discipline of yoga to the Kremlin leadership, Hollywood stars like Gloria Swanson and even students in India, died on Thursday in Buenos Aires. She was 102.

In Buenos Aires, where she had lived for several years, she formed a yoga foundation that was named after her.

Known to her followers as Mataji, which means mother, she was a student of Sri Tirumalai Krishnamacharya, the legendary guru who gained worldwide attention for stopping his heartbeat for two minutes. At a time when yoga was almost an exclusively masculine pursuit, she was his first female student.

Like two of his other students, B.K.S. Ayengar and K. Pattabhi Jois, both men, she took his essential teachings and built a style of yoga accessible to Westerners. It was characterized by gentleness.

"She herself became a kind of seminal figure," said Phil Catalto, a senior editor of Yoga Journal. "She was an ambassador of yoga."

She was born Eugenie Peterson in Riga, Latvia, on May 12, 1899. Her father was a Swedish bank director, and her mother was a Russian noblewoman. She attended drama school in Moscow as a girl, and escaped to Berlin with her mother when the Communists came to power in 1917.

In Berlin, she became an actress and dancer. Her fascination with India began at 15, when she read a book by the poet Rabindranath Tagore, then some books on yoga. In 1927, she sailed for India.

Under the stage name Indra Devi, she became a rising star in Indian films. In 1930, she married Jan Strakaty, commercial attaché to the Czechoslovak Consulate in Bombay. Through him, she met the Maharaja and Maharini of Mysore, who maintained a yoga school in their palace where Sri Krishnamacharya taught.

She asked the master for a lesson. He refused, on the grounds that she was a Westerner and a woman. But she persuaded the royal couple to prevail upon the guru, and he reluctantly consented, said Fernando Pages Ruiz, a freelance writer who interviewed her.

Rather than the cursory lessons he had at first intended, Sri Krishnamacharya taught her for a year. When he learned that her husband was to be transferred to China, he trained her to be a yoga teacher.

In Shanghai, she taught what was thought to be the first yoga class in modern China, Mr. Ruiz said. Her husband, she said in a 1996 interview in Yoga Journal, was "dead set against" her yoga courses. It was also the time of the Japanese occupation.

For a time she held five classes of 25 students a day in the bedroom of Madame Chiang Kaishek, wife of the nationalist leader and a new yoga enthusiast.

After the war, she returned to India and wrote her first book, believed to be the first book on yoga written by a Westerner to be published in India. She also became known as the first Westerner to teach yoga there.

Her husband, meanwhile, had been ordered back to Czechoslovakia, where he died in 1946.

She returned to Shanghai to recover their belongings and was unsure whether to go to India or the United States. She bought tickets for both destinations and resolved to take whichever ship sailed first. America won.

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She found her way to Hollywood, arriving in January 1947. She discovered ready students among movie stars, who found yoga's breathing and relaxation techniques useful to their work. Her students included Miss Swanson, to whom she dedicated one of her 12 books, Robert Ryan, Greta Garbo, Jennifer Jones and the violinist Yehudi Menuhin.

She taught yoga for at Elizabeth Arden's spas in Maine and Arizona, but refused to join the staff.

In 1953, she married Dr. Siegrid Knauer, who preferred preventive medicine to antibiotics. After becoming an American citizen, she legally changed her name to Indra Devi.

Dr. Knauer bought her a 24-room estate in Tecate, Mexico, at which to give training courses for yoga teachers. He died in 1977.

In 1960, India's ambassador to Moscow arranged for her to meet the top Soviet leaders, including Aleksei Kosygin, the premier, Andrei Gromyko, the foreign minister, and Anastas Mikoyan, chairman of the Supreme Soviet. After she spoke to them of the benefits of yoga, it was legalized in Russia.

In 1966, she became captivated by the teachings of the guru Satya Sai Baba. This resulted in a new form of yoga that she called Sai Yoga.

She traveled and taught around the world. In 1982, she visited Argentina, where her popularity snowballed after a single television appearance. She formed a foundation to spread her yoga methods. At the time of her death, it operated six studios.

"She was like a national treasure," Mr. Ruiz said. "It wasn't just yoga, she was known by the population at large."

She had no children by either marriage. A woman at her foundation who identified herself only as Anna said that she had an adopted daughter named Rosita.

Photo: Indra Devi was known as the first Westerner to teach yoga in India. (Reuters)

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